

Flying-fox in South Australia

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This presentation will provide an explanation and background information as to why the Grey-headed Flying-fox has arrived in South Australia and why this behaviour is likely to be repeated in the future.

The recent roosting and feeding behaviour of flying-foxes on the Australian east coast has generally been considered by the media and those unfamiliar with the animal's normal response to a food shortage crisis; as atypical. The severe impact of starvation and the survival strategies adopted by these animals have been documented on at least three occasions over the past twelve years however; the disturbing aspect of their current situation is its severity, duration and range.

The food shortages that impact flying fox populations vary between years in their timing, degree and location. These starvation events are the result of unseasonal weather conditions impacting on an already critically reduced food resource.

The Grey-headed Flying-foxes winter feeding resources in NSW have been reduced to small irregular flowering on the north-western slopes every third year and by single species stands of Spotted gums on the far south coast one in five years. The most reliable winter resource has in the past been produced in lowland coastal woodlands in northern NSW and southern Queensland. However, a human population growth of 60% by the year 2015 estimated in the late 1990's within this critical remaining food resource area will result in a further loss of foraging habitat.

As early as 1930 the effects of increasing human settlement on the traditional roosting and feeding patterns of Australia flying-foxes was becoming apparent. The clearing of eucalypt and rainforests for agricultural and urban development has forced the flying-fox to adapt to the loss of their traditional food resources and roost sites. Increasingly this has led to a movement of flying-foxes to urban areas where food resources are more reliable.

The location of flying-fox camps in or on the edge of suburbia is becoming a common occurrence. In addition urban camps that were traditionally occupied for only several months of the year or by small numbers of flying-foxes are now often occupied permanently and increasing in size.

Environmental awareness within our urban communities has resulted in an explosion of native plantings. Regular watering of our gardens and parklands ensures a higher nectar production in the flying-foxes main diet of eucalypt blossoms a food source that is notoriously unreliable in the wild. Unfortunately this same awareness has not transpired into our rural areas; where local councils and governments continue to sanction mass clearings of native vegetation for industrial and urban development.

South Australia faces a unique challenge in the foreseeable future.